

Lightening in a Cradle

Luke 2: 8-15

**First Presbyterian Church
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The angel said to the shepherds, “Fear not. For behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” Angels don’t waste words. That sentence is loaded. Let’s try to unpack it a bit.

An angel is literally a messenger. Angelic beings are heralds of God’s glory. Their glorious appearance reflects the greatness of the heavenly King who sent them. If his servants are this frighteningly wondrous, what must the King himself be like? Who could endure even to glimpse his splendor? And the angels bring news from heaven into our earthly world. They come with announcements about what God is doing. The angel in our passage today has come to deliver good news of great joy. The angel has a word for the entire nation of God’s people. The Messiah for whom they have been yearning has been born. The savior for which they’ve prayed has entered the world. The cries of God’s people have been heard. The promises have been fulfilled. He has come at last to save them.

As we ponder this scene, we might get struck by something odd. Was the angel mixed up? He was a royal ambassador of heaven. He had been sent to make an announcement to the people of Israel which would ultimately affect the whole world. What kind of ruler sends his most regal diplomat to make a national proclamation in the middle of the night? What kind of king announces his royal arrival to a handful of shepherds in the middle of the countryside? “I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all the people.” Just thought we’d get this great news out by telling a few of you in the middle of the night.

Of course this is God turning the world upside down. Surprising everyone. Not doing it the way anyone expected. Good news for all the people. Who are these people to whom the good news is directed? Let’s walk back through the cast of characters so far assembled in Luke’s gospel. For whom is this good news? It’s certainly for shepherds. The guys who draw a night shift. The guys who don’t have individual names that are remembered. The guys not known for social graces and elite status. This news is also for Joseph and Mary. A working man with an ancient heritage. He was a righteous man, who wanted to do the right thing. And he did the right thing when his fiancé Mary was found to be pregnant, though he

had to endure the shame of bringing her yet unwed to meet the family in his hometown. This news was for the couple who found no room in the inn and laid their baby in the straw of a feeding trough. But look back farther to the first chapter of Luke. This news was for Zechariah and Elizabeth. They also were good people who did their best to keep all the commandments of the Lord. But their lives had not shown signs of being blessed. They had no children, a disgrace for the wife in those days. They had no heirs, and they had grown old. There were no children to take care of them. And there was no reason to regard them. Their family line would end soon with no one coming along. They were discardable old people.

And to these people the news was made known first. Who are the people to whom this birth is announced? People on the edges. People in the night. People with shame. People without enough work. People without children to brag about. People with poor prospects. People who only get bills in the mail have now received a gilded invitation. God reaches out to the edges first and then works his way into the center. He casts his net of grace out beyond all the usual expectations and gathers us in. This good news is for anyone who is receptive. All those who have come to the end of self-sufficiency and know they need a savior. Do you want to hear this news? Then it's for you.

The shepherds barely had time to process this announcement when suddenly the sky exploded with even more light. A multitude of angels appeared. Heaven's army was revealed. They brandished their weapons over the earth. But their weapons were not swords or chariots, though they certainly could have exercised that kind of power. Their most potent weapon was to sing the praise of the only wise God who had ordained so great a salvation. Heaven's host sang not war but peace between God and men. These angels took the lid off the sky so that the shepherds could peer into deeper realities. I can scarcely imagine how beautiful their voices must have been. How harmonious and clarion, how subtle and overwhelming, how intricate and straight forward all at once:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace
Among those with whom he is pleased.

The King James Version renders this so beautifully. And whether it's from all the times I've watched Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* or Linus with his blanket on *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, this is how I still hear it:

Glory to God in the highest
Peace on earth, good will toward men.

In either version, this beautiful song creates a mirror effect between heaven and earth.

Above us is: heaven, God and glory,
Among us is: earth, men, and peace.

In heaven let God be glorified; on earth let men find peace. The two come together in the Christ child. In heaven God is glorified because Jesus is born and he creates peace on earth both within men's' souls and among them. Because Jesus the Son of God has entered the world, the two realms of heaven and earth are now reconciled, now connected. The glory of God in heaven has burst into the world to create peace inside and outside, within souls and among people.

Now the angels are not selfish singers. They did not sing their song to the shepherds for their own benefit. They sang for us. They sang so that we could learn the words and enter the worship. They declared the reality Christ Jesus the Lord and Savior has brought to the world. When we join their praise, the experience of that salvation deepens within us and changes our relationships. When we add the voice of our souls to this angel song, God is glorified and we are changed. Let me say that another way to show the cause and effect: Giving glory to God for the gift of his Son leads to peace within souls and peace among people.

Way back in the second century, a teacher named Irenaeus declared, "The glory of God is man alive." God's glory is humanity restored. Men and women brought back to life from spiritual death is the adornment of glory God desires. The angels sing the Glory of God because he has sent a savior to make man live again. The glory of God is man alive. Irenaeus goes on to give the other side of the coin, "And the life of man consists in beholding God." God's glory is not man alive to do anything he wants to do. It's man restored to relationship with God. Our life is in beholding the giver of life in love and faith. But how can we behold God? He's invisible, a spirit, in heaven. But the Christmas news tells us something new. Unto you is born a savior, Christ the Lord. Behold your God. He is shining in the face of Christ the babe. The life of man is realizing that he has shown his face in Jesus Christ. And when we see that, we come alive, and the glory of God is man-made alive again.

Heaven, God, and glory have come down to earth to restore man to peace with God, peace with others, peace with himself. That's what the baby in the manger has done.

Let's turn this one more way. In our ESV Bibles, the angel song reads, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." Did anything inside you start to get uncomfortable hearing that? Any little niggling and nudging in your soul that unsettles the joy of the angel song? I wish we just had the unqualified words of the King James Version: good will toward men. That's unqualified. All inclusive. God has good will toward humanity. Merry Christmas and thank you.

But the best manuscripts that we have of the original language make it more complicated than that. Literally it says, "Peace in men with whom he, [God], is pleased." Peace among people towards whom God has good will. Is that everyone? Is that just a few? Does God have good pleasure in me?

Now, for more than a thousand years, people read the Latin version of the Bible in a way that put all the pressure on us. Jerome translated it this way, "Peace on earth among men of good will." So the peace of God in the world comes to the men who have good will in themselves? That means if I want the peace that the savior brings, I have to get myself together. First, I have to work to not need a savior in order to get a savior. Because the peace is just for those who generate in themselves by themselves good will toward God and each other. Now that kind of thinking might get me to give more to charity at the end of the year. But it's no way to find any spiritual peace. And it guarantees I'm going to be a pretender, trying to appear better than I feel. It guarantees I'll be competitive and envious of those who seem to be doing better at good will than I am. Truthfully, having to be worthy of Christmas peace just crushes me with pressure.

No person in himself can be pleasing to God. I'm not worthy of a savior which is why I need a savior. And thankfully, Scripture comes to my rescue revealing a more glorious way.

Just one chapter later, Luke recounts the baptism of Jesus as he starts his ministry. When Jesus came out of the waters, a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." There is only one man with whom the Father is fully pleased. His Son the beloved who became a man for us. Peace to men with whom God is pleased. Who is the pleasing one? Not me! The

Son, the beloved, Jesus who loved his Father utterly and loved his fellow man perfectly. Jesus is the pleasing one.

So here's the trick. If I want the peace announced in the angel song, I won't find it in myself. I find it in Christ. I have to be in Jesus the beloved Son to partake of the Father's good pleasure. How does that happen? Will he have me? Will he join me to his son Jesus? Will he locate me in the Beloved?

You just have to love how Scripture holds together. In Luke 12, in the middle of his ministry, Jesus teaches his disciples about finding peace amidst worry. And he tells them, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." It's the same word. Good pleasure. Well-pleased. Good will. Only one man earns the Father's good pleasure. That's Jesus. But it's the Father's good pleasure to give the Son to us! It's his delight to locate us in the Beloved.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul writes that our adoption as sons occurs according to God's good pleasure. Same word. His pleased purpose. His good will. Paul goes on to write that we have been accepted. Not in ourselves. But in the Beloved. We have been adopted as sons through Jesus Christ the beloved Son. We have been accepted because of his acceptability. We have been made sons according to his Sonship. By the Father's good pleasure we partake of the well-pleasing person and work of the Son.

Behold I bring good news to all the people: to the shepherds at midnight, to the pregnant unwed Mary, to the aged Elizabeth, to the hard working, highly pressured Joseph. In the middle of the night in regions remote the call goes out. Unto you. You! Is born a savior, Christ the Lord. He is the Beloved Son come to earth. He is the acceptable, well-pleasing one.

When the shepherds heard the angels sing, they left their flocks and ran to Bethlehem. They had to see this child. They had to partake of him through worship. When you hear news of this savior, how can you keep from storming this table where he gives himself to us? How can you hold back from flying to this table to say, "Give me the kingdom! Make me acceptable in the Beloved! Bring the peace of being his. Give it to me! Give it to me now! Glory to God in the highest!"